

Brass Bands and the Salvation Army

By Peter Bale, 2008

Why, when and where?

It may be thought as strange that brass bands should have such a prominent place in a religious movement such as The Salvation Army, and it may help if I initially outline how and why the Salvation Army started. William Booth, referred to as the Founder of The Salvation Army, was a minister in the Methodist New Connection in the midst of the religious revival taking place in Victorian England. Even from his childhood, he had felt impelled to take the gospel message to those who were in particular need, and who may not have been made particularly welcome in the more established churches of the day. Having felt too restricted in his ministry, he moved to London with his family, and came across a tent mission in Whitechapel. When the invitation was given for anyone to have a word, he took up the opportunity and made such an impression on those running the mission that they invited him to be their leader. Thus it was that The Salvation Army commenced, initially, in 1865, as the East London Christian Mission, then dropping the East London part as the work expanded, and in 1878 adopting the title The Salvation Army.

In the early days, The Salvation Army didn't own any premises, hiring rooms as and when required and also carrying out much of its ministry in the open air. It was soon found that music was a great draw to attract the crowds, with religious words often being set to tunes that would be familiar from the music halls and other sources, with various accompaniment being used, particularly violins and concertinas, that were plentiful at the time. The open air work was subject to a lot of opposition, and not only from ruffians as might be expected: many of the "respectable" church authorities were resentful of what they saw as a challenge to their traditional way of doing things, and this led in many places to an unholy alliance, with opponents terming themselves as the "skeleton army", determined to disrupt the Army's activities. So it was that in Salisbury in the autumn of 1878 four members of the Fry family answered an appeal for bodyguards to protect the largely female missionaries. They were Methodists, but also played brass instruments. The father, Charles, played cornet in the band of the 1st Wiltshire Volunteer Rifle Corps and his three sons had been taught to play at an early age. The captain in charge suggested that they may like to bring their instruments to the market-place to assist with the singing, and so, with two cornets, euphonium and valve trombone, what could be termed the first official Salvation Army band was formed.

Although the Fry family continued to support the Salvation Army's work, they became attached to headquarters, rather than being based at a local corps. The distinction of being the first Corps band of the Salvation Army is generally claimed by Consett in County Durham, dating from 1879, although there are others who would also make their own claims, notably Salisbury and Northwich. This discussion gained such significance that in 1906 a Board of Inquiry was set up, which accepted Consett's prior existence by a few months.

Headquarters and other bands:

In addition to the local corps bands, there have various other groups, either set up for particular campaigns or attached to one or other of the headquarters departments. In 1887 a group of young men was recruited to form the Household Troops Band. These volunteers were not to receive any payment, only board and lodgings, as they carried out musical campaigns, often travelling between venues on foot, and sleeping in barns or on the floor of the hall. In 1888 they became the first Salvation Army band to cross the Atlantic, a ten-day journey by sea, spending five months in Canada and a further couple of months in the USA. Ten years ago, the concept of the Household Troops Band was revived under the leadership of Major John Mott, the players mainly comprising alumni from the Salvation Army's School of Music, and complete with their distinctive white pith helmets. They usually undertake a week's tour, with much open air and bandstand activity, plus the occasional special event. For the past few years they have also taken part in the Lord Mayor's Show and have made several recordings.

The International Staff Band traces its origins to the Junior Staff Band formed while the Household Troops were abroad. Drawing its players initially exclusively from personnel on the staff at International Headquarters it soon became central to the banding activity of the Army. The present ISB only includes a small number of players who are actually employed by the Salvation Army, but still officiates at various events held in London, as well as undertaking eight away weekends a year. In the case of mid-week and particularly day-time engagements, they will often have to put out a reduced band because of work commitments, and I believe the traditional day-time rehearsal has also had to be dropped. Another important role for the ISB is to present any new works to the Music Board for approval before publication.

Amongst other notable headquarters bands was the S.P. & S. (Salvationist Publishing and Supplies) Band, formed specifically to demonstrate the capabilities of a smaller number of players, and to promote the new Second Series Band Journal (now known as the Triumph Series, of which more later). Eric Ball was the bandmaster and its eighteen members included many of the most prominent players in Salvation Army banding. The band was disbanded at the outbreak of World War Two, when many players were called up for military service. The Men's Social Work Headquarters Band also operated before the war, notably under the leadership of Colonel Arthur Goldsmith. The Salvation Army Assurance Society Band was the first Salvation Army band to take part in the Lord Mayor's Show in 1928, but is probably better known in its later incarnation as the Rosehill Band, named after the premises the Society moved to during the war. After Major Walter Ward and, for a very short period, Eric Ball, Albert Jakeway was appointed bandmaster, and the band undertook many broadcasts and recordings that are preserved for posterity before its demise in 1951.

Bands overseas:

As the Salvation Army spread internationally, so the banding tradition went with it. One of the first overseas footholds for The Salvation Army was the United States, and the New York Staff Band traces its existence back to 1887, with bands in Canada, Australia and New Zealand also dating back to the 1880's. Bands were also started on continental Europe, but without a brass band tradition, and often in primarily catholic countries, they did not become established in the same way, although the

German Staff Band campaigned quite widely, and Holland has a number of fine bands. In Scandinavia the brass band has played a prominent role alongside that unique institution, the string band, consisting of guitars etc, and the Stockholm 7 and Tranas Bands have both built up a fine reputation.

Instrumentation and scoring:

It took a while for Salvation Army bands to adopt anything like a standard instrumentation, and they were not bound by any restrictions placed imposed by contest promoters or banding federations. Equally, the size of Salvation Army bands has always varied widely, from very small combinations up to 50 or more players. In the 1920's and 1930's a number of bands included sections of saxophones and/or tenor cors in addition to the normal brass band instrumentation. The "ideal band" set out by George Darby, bandmaster of the New York Staff Band in 1912, and based in wind-band dominated North America, included clarinets, saxophones, trumpets and French horns in his compliment of 35 players, alongside the traditional cornets and tenors horns! Contrabass trombones in Eb and Bb were also occasionally used by the larger bands.

For many years, Salvation Army bands were restricted (officially!) to playing music published by The Salvation Army, whether that was specially written marches or selections or transcriptions of music originally written for other forces. In the 1990's this restriction was removed, both allowing SA bands the use of any music they choose and also making the vast library of Salvation Army repertoire available to everybody. From the early days, the Salvation Army set up a Music Department to encourage composers, and vet works submitted for publication. With the range of sizes of bands already referred to, quite early on the music was graded according to the forces required, and to some extent its difficulty. The Band Journal initially included a series of fairly basic arrangements, generally transcriptions of vocal music that would be familiar to the listeners. This was then expanded to give approval to the production of original marches, initially without the later requirement that they had to feature a hymn tune, often in the trio section. Selections (suites) and the distinctive Salvation Army "meditation", based on a hymn tune, soon followed, although the use of the term "Air varie" was studiously avoided at first.

The instrumentation has changed little from the early days, although early editions included clarinet parts, and assumed that the Bb bass would be played by an instrument of euphonium pitch, hence appearing above the Eb in the score. The Bb bass proper became more widely used about the turn of the century and the woodwind parts were dropped in 1902. The flugel horn was a later addition, and the Triumph Series, introduced in 1921, was for a reduced instrumentation, with only two cornet parts, two horns, no soprano and no bass trombone.

The Festival Series Band Journal was introduced in 1923, intended to produce larger, more intricate works, with the specific instruction that the music was only to be used in musical festivals, rather than as part of Sunday worship – another restriction that has fortunately now been lifted! As was mentioned earlier, there is no restriction limiting Salvation Army bands to 25 players, and this is reflected in the scoring. It is quite common to find both first and second trombone parts being written divisi, and in many earlier publications the same is found with horn and baritone. Percussion was very basic in the early days, and was one of the causes of a break from the ranks,

with 29 members of Coventry City Band resigning in 1939, amongst the issues of contention being the introduction of a sousaphone and timpani to the ranks!

The Unity Series Band Journal came in the 1950s, aimed specifically at smaller combinations, with much doubling of parts. Amongst the notable composers who have been involved with the Music Editorial Department are Fred Fry, Richard Slater (formerly a violinist with d'Oyly Carte), Arthur Goldsmith, Fred Hawkes, Bramwell Coles (often referred to as the SA's march king), Albert Jakeway and Ray Steadman-Allen. Other members of staff at various times have included bandleader Henry Hall (a bandsman at Nunhead Corps at the time), Philip Catelinet (the dedicatee of the Vaughan Williams Tuba Concerto), Leslie Condon and Peter Graham.

Membership of Salvation Army Bands:

I should probably include something about the actual membership of the bands: the prime role of the band is to support the congregation in worship, and to provide an outreach resource to help spread the gospel. The Salvation Army itself, although it retains its own distinctive identity, is part of the mainstream Christian church. As such, Salvationists make their own commitment of faith when they become members, which usually takes place at a public enrolment ceremony. In line with the military terminology adopted in Victorian times, each new soldier signs the Articles of War and pledges their allegiance to God through the Salvation Army. Soldiers will often wear uniform as a form of witness, but need not do so. One element of that commitment is a pledge to abstain from the use of tobacco, alcohol or non-prescribed drugs.

Before a bandsman (or woman) is able to formally join the band, they are asked to sign a Bandsman's Bond, outlining their commitment to service within that section. In the past, that would have included limitations on what playing they could do outside of the Salvation Army, with the exception of those who played professionally. In the past, the officious interpretation of minor rules led to much conflict, with many choosing to leave the ranks accordingly. Such acts as attending the football on a Saturday could lead to disciplinary action – including on occasion being asked to march behind the band – and only Salvation Army instruments were allowed to be used. This last led to problems for my own father when, as a student, he appeared with his much-prized and brand new trombone, only to be told he couldn't play it, even though he would have been quite happy for it to have been "dedicated" if required!

Several years ago, it was recognised that there were many people worshipping regularly, but not feeling able to enter into the full commitment of soldiership. It was decided that they should be able to receive formal recognition as Adherents, recognising The Salvation Army as their church and giving them a greater sense of belonging. It is interesting to note that, when The Salvation Army recommenced its work in Russia, the decision was made to allow adherents to play in the bands, and a number of military musicians commenced their banding as adherents, only later moving into full soldiership. In most cases, however, only soldiers are allowed to become bandsmen.

Personalities:

There has always been a degree of interaction between the bands of the Salvation Army and the world of contesting bands, as well as a number of players who went on to develop professional musical careers. In the past it was generally a question of “one or the other”, as it was not allowed for a player to be a Salvation Army bandsman and play in other bands. Now there are a number of players who combine the two, not to mention the composers and arrangers who have a foot in both camps.

The first name that is likely to spring to mind would be Eric Ball, with many compositions of various types to his name, with the series of Tone Poems probably being at the core of his oeuvre. It is possible to trace the Salvation Army influence in many of his later contest works, such as “High Peak” and “Journey into Freedom”, not to mention “Resurgam”, written for the national Finals but later published by the Salvation Army as a facsimile of the original R Smiths version, and described in one recorded interview by the composer as “a Salvation Army piece, in that it was written by a Salvationist”.

Dean Goffin was a young New Zealand composer when his “Rhapsody in Brass” was used in the British Open Contest of 1949. On realising that he was a Salvationist the question was asked as to why he wasn’t writing for the Army, only to discover that there were a number of times languishing on the shelf in the Music Department! The Salvation Army work “My strength, my tower” was written as a companion piece to “Rhapsody in Brass”, and “Symphony of Thanksgiving” for the 60th anniversary of the ISB.

Erik Leidzen originated from Sweden, but spent most of his life in the USA, where he was a leading figure in the wind band movement and in music education. He contributed many notable air varie solos, including “Song of the Brother” for euphonium, “Wondrous day” for cornet and “Concertino for trombone and band”, written for Maisie Wiggins, then first trombone with the Halle orchestra and still playing today. His many marches have earned lasting popularity, including “In the King’s service” and “Invincible Army”. His “Sinfonietta for brass band” was used for the 1959 British Open Championships.

George Marshall was bandmaster of the South Shields corps in the northeast of England, and spent much of his life in a wheelchair following a pit accident. Many of his marches are still popular, together with solos such as “Ransomed” and selections such as “Great and Glorious” and “Army of the Brave”.

Ray Steadman-Allen has been on the scene for a long time now, with the most varied range of pieces coming from his pen. Major works include “The Holy War”, “Fantasia for piano and band, Christ is the answer”, “Victorian snapshots: On Ratcliff Highway”, “The Lord is King” and the trombone solo “The Eternal Quest”. Following his retirement as a Salvation Army officer he was commissioned to write “Seascapes” for the 1988 National finals, and “Hymn at Sunrise” for the 1996 Cambridge Masters Championships.

Leslie Condon was a first class tuba player, and wrote “Celestial Morn” for himself, as well as the duet “Radiant Pathway”, with options for various combinations of tuba and euphonium. Major works include “Easter Glory”, “Song of the Eternal” and

“Festivity”, which originated as a quintet for cornets and trombones. Les Condon was a great innovator, and it would be interesting to see how his style would have developed if he hadn’t died so young.

Wilfred Heaton was not a prolific composer, and was very self-critical, which may not have been helped when some of his earlier works were rejected as being felt to be ahead of their time. The march “Praise”, “Victory for me”, “Just as I am” and “My treasure” are all examples of a real craftsman at work. “Toccata – Oh the blessed Lord” started life as a sextet written for a visit to America, but was subsequently scored for band (without percussion), and “Celestial prospects”, recently selected as an Area contest piece, was also a revision of a work written many years before. Also of note is the cornet duet “Wonderful words”. “Contest Music” was also turned down when initially submitted as being too advanced, but was later adopted and has now become an established favourite, following the advocacy of such leading band personalities as Elgar Howarth.

Edward Gregson’s early works for the Salvation Army include “Variations on Laudate Dominum”, the march “Chalk Farm Number 2” and the “Symphonic Rhapsody for euphonium and band”, currently seeing something of a revival. His test pieces have included “Dances and Arias”, “Connotations” and the sometimes overlooked “Of men and mountains”, that gained some notoriety when it was dropped from a major contest as it was felt to be too long. His most notable recent contribution to the brass repertoire is “Trumpets of the angels”, featuring seven solo trumpets and organ as well as band.

In 1996 Robert Redhead became the first active Salvation Army officer to write a major test piece when he was commissioned to write “Isaiah 40” for the Royal Albert Hall. He was also one of the prime movers behind the relaxation of the rules concerning music. British born he is now a Canadian citizen, and a number of his more significant works were written when he was bandmaster of the Canadian Staff Band, including “Pastoral Symphony”, “Deus Vobiscum” (dedicated to the members of the 1914 band who lost their lives when the boat bringing them to London was involved in a collision) and the testing solos “Life abundant” and “Euphony”.

Kenneth Downie is currently bandmaster of the Winchester corps, and has contributed many works, including both major compositions such as “Variations on Princethorpe”, “Through the blood of the lamb” and “Music of thanksgiving”, and smaller meditations, treated with the same care and with his distinctive harmonic twists, such as “In perfect peace”. “St Magnus”, written for the European Championships in Glasgow in 2004, and based on the hymn tune of that name, was well-received by both players and listeners, gaining instant success.

Peter Graham has worked for Salvation Army music departments in London and New York, as well as having a spell as Bandmaster at Regent Hall in London. His SA pieces include “Blazon” (written for the centenary of the ISB), “Sinfonietta – the dawning”, the trombone solo “The Guardian” and the cornet duet “Quicksilver”. Testpieces include “Harrison’s Dream”, “Montage” and “On Alderley Edge”. One of his most popular works, “Shine as the light”, was written for the Star lake music camp, and dedicated to the memory of NYSB tuba player Al Honsberger.

American composers have also made their presence felt, with William Himes, James Curnow, William Gordon and Steven Bulla, plus the Canadian Morley Calvert. From Scandinavia have come Eiliv Herikstad and Erik Silfverberg, and from Australia Barrie Gott.

Availability of music and recordings:

Most Salvation Army music is published by SP&S Ltd, and available through www.worldofbrass.com. Whereas much of it was published in journal form, with four pieces on a sheet, available relatively cheaply by means of a subscription service, it is recognised this may not be appropriate in all cases, and many items are now available as stand-alone items. This has included resetting some of the earlier publications where the solo cornet copies in particular were hard to read due to a combination of the small page size and split parts on the same copy. The Salvation Army in the USA and Canada produce their own items, and a number of Salvationist composers now publish their own items, such as Kenneth Downie with his Kantara Music and Andrew Mackereth's Blow & Believe Publications.

There are numerous recordings available by both corps bands and staff sections, and these are also mainly available through www.worldofbrass.com, although some bands sell direct to the public, and there are probably local sources available that would reduce shipping costs, such as the New York Staff Band's website at www.nysb.org. There are also some interesting re-releases of some of the early recordings, originally on 78rpm, which makes for an interesting comparison in style, with the trombones in particular having a very distinctive sound. The latest recording by the International Staff Band, a double cd entitled "Origins", features works by 12 Salvationist composers whose music has also been used for major contests.